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Debate on Vietnam: Rhetoric vs. Reality

By Henry Owen

THE LAST FEW weeks have seen a widening gulf between reality and rhetoric in public debate over Vietnam, reminiscent of the advice given armed forces weather trainees during World War II: after completing their theoretical analyses, they were told to look out the window and see what's actually happening.

What's actually been happening about Vietnam?

Item: The process of U.S. withdrawal has begun. The second withdrawal was larger than the first, and future ones will presumably be larger still. Press reports suggest that the United States will withdraw about half of its forces by the end of 1970.

Item: South Vietnamese leaders appear to accept this. They have publicly proclaimed their confidence that they can replace all U.S. ground combat forces by the end of 1970. They ask for a definitive schedule of U.S. withdrawals and material aid, to help them in this task.

Item: U.S. casualties have been way down for two weeks running.

In short, the shift of U.S. forces to a greatly reduced role and level, foreshadowed by Secretary Laird in his Time magazine interview, is going forward. One would expect public debate to focus on this process—with the President's supporters pointing with pride to the fact that he has a coherent plan for replacing U.S. forces, and critics asking hard questions about the means of carrying it out and where it leads over the long run. This would be a useful debate. But instead, what we are actually all talking about are two rather unlikely alternatives: total withdrawal of all U.S. forces—ground and air, combat and support—in a year; and an early formal political settlement of the war.

THE REASON for this turn in the debate may be found in that random process which, Tolstoy argued, is the principal shaper of our destinies. It all began when Senator Goodell of New York asked the Congress to resolve that all U.S. forces in Vietnam should be withdrawn before the end of 1970. This was a natural enough expression of his and his constituents' concern over the war. It has not commended itself to most of the Congress; Senator Saxbe of Ohio, a leading critic of the war, evidently spoke for many of his colleagues when he called it unrealistic.

No one expected President Nixon to endorse Senator Goodell's proposal, since it seemed to conflict directly with the administration's Vietnamization strategy. If the United States were to announce that it would withdraw all U.S. troops in little more than a year, the South Vietnamese would despair of filling the gap so quickly; resulting demoralization in Saigon would make it difficult to mobilize the increased South Vietnamese effort needed to make "Vietnamization" work.

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But the administration did not base its opposition to Senator Goodell's proposal on these grounds. Instead, it stressed the adverse effect that this proposal would have on prospects for a formal settlement—and asked for a show of national unity, to help get such a settlement more quickly. The administration is right: Hanoi would have little motive to negotiate if it expected all U.S. forces to be out before the end of 1970. But there is a large question as to whether, even if Hanoi did not expect this to happen, a formal political settlement would soon follow.

There is little evidence to suggest that Hanoi has been sacrificing the flower of its manhood for four years just to get free elections in South Vietnam; there is considerable evidence to suggest that it is fighting to reunite what it considers to be one country. If so, it may react to even the most imaginative proposals for free elections about as enthusiastically as Lincoln would have responded to proposals that he settle the Civil War by arranging for the people of the Confederacy to vote on whether they should rejoin the Union. All this doesn't prove that there will never be a political settlement; but it does suggest that it may be a long time coming, if at all, and then probably only after Hanoi has been convinced by prolonged experience that the process of Vietnamization and U.S. withdrawal can go forward successfully.

CALLS FOR total early withdrawal and for national unity in seeking an early political settlement thus focus attention on what are, in fact, the least likely outcomes to the war. And while these exchanges about courses of action at the far end of the spectrum take place, the great middle ground of reality, on which both Secretary Laird and former Secretary Clifford focused their proposals for partial withdrawal, tends to get short shrift. The result is twofold:

First: The administration is missing an opportunity to explain—and get credit for—the strategy which it will presumably continue to follow, in the likely absence of early political settlement: a strategy which could produce sharply reduced levels of U.S. involvement, cost and casualties within the next 12 months.

Second: The hard questions which this strategy poses are not being publicly addressed. Should the drawdown of U.S. forces proceed according to a fixed schedule or be determined periodically and pragmatically in light of changing conditions? Should it be geared to the other side's actions at Paris and on the battlefield, or to a unilateral U.S. decision to shift more responsibility to the South Vietnamese? If most or all U.S. ground combat forces are withdrawn by the end of 1970, how much longer should remaining support forces be left in Vietnam, and in what numbers? These and related questions which will have to be faced in the months ahead require intensive public discussion. But they won't get it until the debating gap between rhetoric and reality is greatly narrowed.